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ABSTRACT

Teachers and students worked together at the University of Alabama to evolve a literature course that dealt with the Southern regional character and culture as manifested in the writings of women. The course began with an orientation to the region, with emphasis on the images and stereotypes of Southern women. Literary material included in the course was divided into four sections determined by subregions and covering lowland white, lowland black, mountain, and Cajan, Acadian, and Creole. Planned activities integrated reading, discussion, and a number of research tasks that included collection of oral history, study of folklore, and archival work with manuscripts. Regionalism was approached as a whole perceptual structure manifested in each piece of writing through the language, structure, details of climate, setting, flora, fauna, social relationships, community layout, and individual character types. (MAI)

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SOUTHERN WOMEN'S LITERATURE: A PROCESS OF DISCOVERY

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I have been asked to speak primarily about the mechanics of developing a course entitled Southern Women's Literature and Culture which was team taught at The University of Alabama in the spring of this year. Alice Parker, Rose Gladney and I designed the course, following a semester of partial release time for research. We essentially created a course that we wanted to take ourselves. The research process had brought us to the point where we had identified a variety of promising resources, articulated the idea of a procedure and could describe a variety of topics that warranted further exploration before valid generalizations might be formulated.

We had many questions for which none of us had the answers, placing us at the outset in a co-teacher and co-learner relationship to our students. Because "regional character" and "women's culture" are categories that defy precise definition, the attendant questions are so large that even in teaching the course again, I find myself only slightly better prepared.

The greatest problem is methodological. While fields like folklore and comparative literature suggest useful analytical strategies for cultural studies, neither women's studies nor regional studies have as yet an encompassing methodology which could assist us in a broad approach to Southern women's culture. There are always too many variables, so we are never certain why we see what we see. We can rarely determine if characters and events occur as they do in a particular work because the writer is a woman, a Southerner, a resident of a small town, or a member of a particular socio-economic class or racial group. We wanted to know

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who Southern women were and what the textures of their lives had been so that we could understand which qualities were "ordinary" or common and which "extraordinary." We accepted Virginia Woolf's summation in "Women and Fiction":

The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary women. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life--the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task--it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer.
(Collected Essays, NY; HB, 67, II, 142)

To this we added a much longer list of questions--whether she was hungry, if her house was adequate, how she viewed her physical surroundings, what she valued, whether she enjoyed the company of other women for intellectual or emotional support, how she was raised and how she raised her children, how she related to men and to members of other races and economic classes, what role religion played in her life, and how she was or was not politically conscious of events in her own time.

Although we weren't sure what these questions meant in terms of how we would teach, we decided to adopt the following procedure: we would begin with a general orientation to the region as a whole; we would examine prevalent images and stereotypes used to depict Southern women; we would acquire skills necessary for a variety of research tasks, specifically oral history, folklore collecting, archival work with manuscripts; we would divide the literary material into four sections, by sub-region, covering lowland white, lowland black, mountain, and Cajun, Acadian and Creole; we would conclude with presentations of student work, discussing it in light of all that had come before, and reconsidering any provisional generalizations in terms of the students' specific research findings.

Because it is as difficult to see one's region as it is to know one's self, we began by looking at visual representations of regionalism from other parts of the country. Here painters are useful, making visible the meaning of our relationship

to the land, as these words from Georgia O'Keeffe demonstrate:

. . . when I paint a red hill, because a red hill has no particular association for you like the flower has, you say it is too bad that I don't always paint flowers. A flower touches almost everyone's heart. A red hill doesn't touch everyone's heart as it touches mine and I suppose there is no reason why it should. The red hill is a piece of the bad lands where even the grass is gone. Bad lands roll away outside my door--hill after hill--red hills of apparently the same sort of earth that you mix with oil to make paint. All the earth colors of the painter's palette are out there in the many miles of badlands. . . . You have no association with those hills--our waste land--I think our most beautiful country. You must not have seen it, so you want me always to paint flowers. . .
(Georgia O'Keeffe, NY: Viking, 76, n.p.)

Students moved easily from remarks like O'Keeffe's to a discussion of the cognitive dissonance they experienced in places outside their own region. Southern students seemed readily to understand "the politics of greatness" which value the urban northeastern male novelist over the Southerner, the short story writer, the woman.

Using obscure and out of print archival materials, we considered mythologies of Southern womanhood--the Belle, "Aunt Jemima," Evangeline, Pygmalion. In examining the literature representative of the four sub-cultural perspectives, we employed the same format each time. We began with a consideration of the cultural matrix from which the writers' lives and works evolved. In every subsection we listened to music, explored folklore, viewed photographic images of women and their physical environments, and listened to their own words as they were found in oral testimonies. We wanted to evoke the people and places of each area so that they would be vividly present in our imaginations when we evaluated literary approximations. After that we moved through a progression from better known writers like Arnow and O'Connor to lesser known figures such as Ada Jack Carver and Birtha-lene Miller, attempting to understand the vagaries of literary reputation. The procedure worked very well.

In the best class sessions, everyone contributed to the development of a picture either of an image cluster, theme or emerging picture of a writer's

circumstances. The students taught each other with great success. For some, the course was received as it had been intended: an integrated experience in reading, discussion and research. When asked to choose the best among these aspects, one student said, ". . . each has been very valuable. The readings are good because they were previously unknown. The discussions let me hear others' views on the material. The research has stirred me to action."

Student research with manuscripts and oral history was difficult for two reasons: it was a new experience demanding the use of skills they had not practiced before and formats for which they had no models. To prepare them for work with archival materials, each student was required to transcribe and analyze one significant page of a woman's journal in the University collection. Those who later chose projects using archival materials did so largely as a result of this experience. Even in the controlled exercise, they took care that rivalled CEAA editors. In instances where special collection folders already contained transcriptions provided by library staff or various scholars, the students always improved upon the previous work.

Their oral history work was on the whole much less successful. They seemed naturally adept at conducting the interviews, but uniformly weak at analyzing the material they collected. Principles of thesis, purpose, analysis, demonstration and explication all eluded them. The spoken word seemed to have qualities of self-evidence and inviolability that years of practice with the printed word had helped them overcome. In response, two new strategies were employed this year: we had a two day oral history practicum, interviewing with video equipment at a local crafts fair where we spoke with senior citizens; then we previewed the tapes in class, discussing possibilities for analysis and critiquing interview techniques. Students were also required to submit a bibliography of resources along with their project proposals. Basically, they need to understand that oral history, like

more conventional literary and historical analysis, is done for the purpose of discovering or demonstrating something. In addition, individuals working with women's documents and oral testimony need to be encouraged from the outset to relate their work to relevant published materials.

These exercises with manuscripts and oral history prepared students for their guided research projects, for which each received a \$100 research subsidy. During the previous semester, the three of us had developed pages of suggested topics. Only 25% of the students elected to work on topics which we had formulated, and most of them chose to do projects in their home communities. The following examples suggest the topics selected: 1) An evaluation of manuscript materials and out-of-print novels of Augusta Evans Wilson with a particular focus on her political stance before, during and after the Civil War, comparing it with the attitudes of other women of the same period; 2) a feminist reconstruction of the biography of Varina Howell Davis, the "First Lady" of the Confederacy; 3) a critical study of the life and works of Mary McNeil Fenollosa, novelist, poet, scholar and wife of Ernest Fenollosa; 4) oral history and critical assessment of the printed works of Sara Mayfield--reporter, inventor, novelist and author of works on Mencken and the Fitzgeralds; 5) a study of the poetry contained in an 1859 autograph book belonging to Ms. Jane Valentine Pratt of Reform, Alabama; 6) an oral history with family members to reconstruct the life of a female relative, especially focusing on past and present socialization of Southern women.

On the whole, the work was superior to that submitted by students in other university classes. Every respondent on the final evaluation rated the class 10 (on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest) for its effectiveness in conveying concepts of regional literature, regional history and women's culture. The greatest shortcoming on the students part was their tendency to present unanalyzed raw material as projects--not unlike the literature paper that doesn't go beyond plot summary, or the folklore paper that is no more than a series of tape transcriptions--

all too familiar instances. Nonetheless, it poses a problem for students and instructors, resulting in part from our failure to provide models for non-traditional forms of analysis.

A number of significant, though undeveloped concepts emerged from the twenty research projects conducted over the semester. Some of the ideas remained undeveloped because they were just uncovered at the end of the term; others are so because a much broader data base is required before any generalizations can be validated. We left with these kinds of questions:

- 1) What sort of history of the Civil War would Southern women write? Are their observations and criticisms of military strategies particularly astute? Do male non-participants also share them?
- 2) Did a women's culture develop during the Civil War? How did women acquire the survival skills that were required? Or did they, in contrast to the myth of the "Southern Belle," possess such managerial and assertiveness skills before the War?
- 3) How does the Southern woman of the past and of today psychically reconcile the image of her passivity with her actual accomplishment? How does this affect her role as a socializing agent for female children?
- 4) What is the function of religious language within nineteenth century women's rhetoric? Do religious texts provide structures with which to think, understand and speak?
- 5) What accounts for the extraordinary sympathies demonstrated by some Southern white women toward their black servants? What is the nature of the psychological split that allows them to love their individual servants and despise blacks collectively?
- 6) What do handwritten cookbooks, scrapbooks and autograph albums tell us about women's lives, talents, preoccupations and aesthetic tastes?
- and 7) What roles have women played in Southern grass roots politics? What

leadership roles did women assume in the Southern Civil Rights movement? What does this information tell us about Southern women's culture? There were even more questions like this that the research projects raised, and the list grows longer this year.

One of the most personally valuable side effects of the course was the extent to which students made meaningful connections with family members and other community residents. They felt encouraged to regard their pasts as important and to see family members as possessing valuable information. Mothers were discovering family papers and arranging liaisons between their daughters and old personal friends. In and out of the classroom, individuals were remembering what they knew. It is as though, in this process of regional research, the elders are restored to their ancient roles as repositories of significant cultural data.

Obviously, we by no means settled the question of regional vs. universal characteristics in literature. We agreed that region manifests itself in the totality of a work--in language, structure, details of climate, setting, flora, fauna, social relationships, community layout and individual character types. That is what it means to say that regionalism and writing emerge from ontology and epistemology, that regionalism must constitute a whole perceptual structure, a cognitive map. Finally, that is the meaning of Georgia O'Keeffe's remark that we must not have seen the red hills or we would not urge her to paint flowers. To an extent, all artists see even our shared reality in a different way from the rest of us, but when there are regional, sexual, racial or socio-economic differences, one might expect, at least for now, that these discrepancies in perception may be at even greater variance.

At the end of that semester and in still another year of investigation, I feel that we need to understand more fully the progression from ontology to epistemology to aesthetics. What do these have to do with perceptual processes? Do our cognitive maps for past and present evidence significant regional variations?

How distinctive and differentiating are regional life styles? How powerful are regional folkways? Flannery O'Connor remarked that manners are the veil through which mystery is revealed. Is it that mysteries are "universals" and manners, or whatever else is involved in getting to mystery, are regional, individual and specific? Certainly, in revealing mystery, something of the region, its past and present, of the writer and of the reader is also told. Regionalism, in my view, takes us to the heart of the matter.